

## FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

**Meeting Date:** October 11, 2012

**Agenda Item: Big Lake WMA East Side Addition**

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** \_\_\_\_\_ Approval of Tentative Rule    X Approval of Final Rule/Action  
                                \_\_\_\_\_ Endorse Course of Action         \_\_\_\_\_ None - information only

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 15 minutes

## Background

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to acquire in fee title approximately 1,282 acres of land adjacent to the east boundary of Big Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA), as seen in Figure 1. Big Lake WMA consists of 2,060 acres located in Stillwater County approximately 23 miles northwest of Billings. The WMA is managed for waterfowl and upland game bird production. Recreational opportunities on Big Lake WMA include hunting for upland birds, waterfowl in wet years, mule deer, antelope, as well as bird watching, wildlife viewing and photography. Most of the west shore of Big Lake is currently owned by FWP, while the east shore is mostly in private ownership. The legal boundary runs through the lake bed making it unfeasible to fence neighboring cattle out of the WMA. Land management activities on the east shore may pose a threat to the habitat quality and recreational opportunities present on Big Lake WMA.

FWP and the owners of parcels 1a and 1b have entered into a Purchase Agreement on roughly 1,110 acres in the amount of approximately \$277,612. Funding will come from the Migratory Bird Stamp Program. FWP will continue to pursue the acquisition of approximately 172 acres in Parcels 2 (~168 acres) and 3 (~four acres), which will be brought before the Commission for final approval at the appropriate time.

## Public Involvement Process & Results

An EA was prepared and released on August 6, 2012, with the public comment period running through August 31, 2012. A public meeting was held in Billings on Aug. 16, 2012. Of the three written comments received, two supported the Proposed Action. One comment from the State Historic Preservation Board reminded FWP to consider any cultural/historic features that may be on the property. At the public meeting, four people offered comments, all of which were in favor of the Proposed Action. A Decision Notice accepting the Proposed Action has been completed.

## EA Alternatives and Analysis

**Proposed Action:** FWP will use State Migratory Bird Stamp Program Funding to acquire the three East Side Addition parcels of land adjacent to Big Lake WMA. This land will be incorporated into the existing WMA and managed under the current Big Lake WMA Management Plan. The EA proposed to acquire approximately 1,105 acres, but based on fence realignment and a recently completed land survey the actual acreage is nearer to 1,282. This is pointed out in the Final Decision Notice.

**Alternative A - No Action:** FWP will continue to manage Big Lake WMA as we have in the past. The East Side Addition parcels will not be acquired. Over time this may result in decreased waterfowl and upland game bird habitat quality as a result of trespass livestock grazing. Further losses of habitat quality and recreational opportunities are possible depending on land use changes along the east shore.

### Agency Recommendation & Rationale

The Department recommends approval by the FWP Commission to purchase parcels 1a and 1b adjacent to Big Lake WMA. This purchase would improve management opportunities on the WMA resulting in enhanced public hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities.

## Proposed Motion

I recommend that the Commission approve the Department's recommendation to purchase in fee title approximately 1,110 acres adjacent to the east boundary of Big Lake WMA.